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President Flunks Human Relations

By BRUCE BIOSSAT

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A Republican figure with a penchant and a talent for human probing says this of President Nixon against the backdrop of Watergate:

"He has used the presidency to justify his weaknesses."

Obviously the statement can have meaning only if it is understood what this man—and a good many other Nixon watchers—consider to be Mr. Nixon's principal weaknesses. They can be summed up easily under the heading of "inability in human relations."

This now is ground pretty well covered in the many hard examinations made of the President's conduct either in or in quest of public office.

What the quoted Republican was getting at is this:

Mr. Nixon long ago perceived his own limitations in dealing close-range with people. In his campaigns for office, and particularly for the White House, he sought to minimize any possible political and personal damage from these evident shortcomings by devices aimed at controlling the "campaign environment" in which he moved.

This meant carefully contrived public appearances, minimum direct exposure to the press through conferences and interviews, avoidance of the traumatic (for him) business of confronting either ordinary voting folk or political leaders in unpredictable one-on-one situations.

But a president, thrown almost inevitably into all kinds of problems he can't foresee, requires a rich variety of human contacts to fuel his imagination and reinforce whatever creative impulses he may bring to the job.

This difficult leap Mr. Nixon has not made. In the White House fortress which automatically fosters a certain isolation for all presidents, he has moved as he did in his campaign—to control his whole "environment." But in this case, that of course means managing the entirety of government, and its approach to problems which in this age are inescapably immense, in a manner which supports the President's great lack in the human field.

So he has contrived to run the presidency as the carefully closeted solitaire player, shuffling the key cards whose symbols spell major foreign and domestic problems. And, to reinforce his chosen devices of control, he has surrounded himself with aides who would keep him secure in his weaknesses—rather than try to help him compensate for them by wide-ranging, understanding contacts with the "human stuff" in politics, in this government, and in those abroad.

A president, as any man, deserves some sympathy as he pays the cost of his frailties. Speaking in his own special context of time and circumstance, President Woodrow Wilson once said: "When they shoot at you, they can only take your natural life; when they sneer at you, they can wound your living heart . . ."

Richard Nixon, in the grip of his frailties, has been sneered at long and often. His response has not always been limited to simple self-protection. Wounded in his "living heart," he has sometimes struck back in vengeful bitterness. The irony: That reply has made his heart a still bigger target.

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